

Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 1980		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-1980 to 00-00-1980	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE Ethical Presuppositions of the Army's Professional Slogans				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) U.S. Army War College,ATTN: Parameters ,122 Forbes Avenue ,Carlisle,PA,17013-5238				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT Same as Report (SAR)	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 3	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

ETHICAL PRESUPPOSITIONS OF THE ARMY'S PROFESSIONAL SLOGANS

by

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In every person there is an unremitting tug of war between self-interest and self-fulfillment. This is what Maslow's hierarchy-of-needs theory is all about. Men are not fools. We live and work in groups, and we care about what our colleagues think and expect of us. We also have an opinion of ourselves. How each of us resolves this conflict between survival and achievement—that is, how we answer the question, “What should I do now?”—is a function of what we expect of ourselves as well as what we think others expect of us. In a chain-of-command organization, pleasing superiors is usually the path of self-interest and survival, while pleasing ourselves is the path of self-fulfillment and mastery. Where these paths begin to diverge is the critical juncture between the system and an officer's professional ethic. It is the crunch-point for integrity.

That behavior which officers think the system will reward, therefore, is just as important an influence on the ethical dimension of their decisions as are their personal and professional values. Whether or not the Army has an ethical problem is a moot question. I believe that it does not. But it clearly has an organizational problem which, in turn, has a strong influence on the professional ethic its officers practice, regardless of what they say they believe. If most officers think the system rewards only acts of self-interest, then acts of self-sacrifice or self-fulfillment will appear to be risky, and

thus become rarer. This perception of risk puts a heavy strain on the integrity of the officer corps.

Integrity means wholeness. It can be properly applied to a person in whom there is correspondence between intention and performance, word and deed, appearance and reality. It is the mark of a man who can transcend narrow self-interest or personal advantage in favor of a higher cause or a larger identity. That capacity, which no one realizes perfectly, is nevertheless the essential core of the professional Army officer who has integrity. It in fact encapsulates what professionalism is in its ethical dimension.

Certain recurring slogans, mottoes, and catch-phrases used by respondents on the anecdotal portion of the Army War College Professionalism Study of 1970¹ highlight the conflict between self-interest and self-fulfillment, thus shedding light on the ethical dimension of professionalism. Four of the slogans imply a corporative frame of mind. *Mission First* suggests that the task is more important than the doer, that one can expend one's whole self in doing it, and that it is important for its own sake, not as a reputation-enhancer. For some, it also implies that people are expendable. *Mission First* implies, in other words, the priority of the group's needs over those of the individual. This is not a traditional American viewpoint, but its importance in a combat environment is obvious. *Take Care of Your*

Men assumes not only that subordinates are important, but indeed more important than their cost to the leader in trouble, inconvenience, and sacrifice. It also implies a bond between leader and led in which feelings count, and which makes them precious to one another as people, not pawns. That is what Army division reunions are all about. *Your Command Characterizes You*, a revealing piece of officer folklore not found in the Army War College study but still heard occasionally on the lips of old colonels, affirms a necessary link between leader and led. It shows an awareness that we are all in this thing together—a condition in which reputation is as important as record because, in some profound sense, we are all at each other's mercy, both leader and led. *SNAFU* (situation normal—all f---d up) is an acronym suggesting that its user has carnal knowledge of an inevitable disjunct between intention and performance, plan and execution, the ideal and the real. To take the second word represented in the acronym ("normal") seriously is to accept the honest ineptitude of humanity. It can be done only by those who accept their own shortcomings. It is the mark of a healthy ego, one that values itself and others realistically. *I'm OK—You're OK*, sincerely uttered, reveals genuine humility, the emotional ground in which the seeds of integrity flourish.

Alongside these corporative slogans we find another series of catch-phrases, more or less connected with the personnel management system, which reflect an egoistic fear of failure, concern for recognition, and preoccupation with how things look to the boss. *Career Development* is a phrase seen frequently in anecdotes about professionalism. It focuses attention on the next step up the ladder, suggesting that one's present duty lacks intrinsic value and is important only as a means to self-advancement. One must *Be Competitive* to play the career-development game. Proficiency, however, becomes a secondary concern. Record, here, is more important than reputation, since one's record is only what the personnel system knows. One's peers and subordinates know his reputation—

intimately—but they do not make the important career selections. To *Be Competitive*, one must have his *Tickets Punched*. This necessity confirms the suspicion that job performance is an instrumental, not an intrinsic, value. Taken together, these phrases signal the attitudes that self comes first, that others are important only as they affect the self's future, and that an ounce of image is worth a pound of performance. *Up or Out* symbolizes, for those below the rank of colonel, preoccupation with self-preservation—the first law of the bureaucratic jungle. It is the prime enemy of integrity and self-sacrifice because, under the *Up or Out* policy, the ante has been raised to survival itself. Meanwhile, below-the-zone advancement has become the index of success.

There is another group of slogans which describe the expectations of the chain of command. *Zero Defects* is the nickname of the commander who counsels perfection. Self-deception, hypocrisy, and fear are his principal subordinates. *Don't Rock the Boat* clearly advises that independent judgment and initiative are unwelcome impediments to the joys of one's superior in command. It implies that any challenge to the status quo will be met by demands for conformity. *Can Do* makes clear that the right response to any

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request or directive, no matter how fatuous or uninformed, is energetic action. Anything is possible to the *Can Doer*. Unfortunately, anything is also appropriate so long as it is desired by his boss. To the *Can Doer*, there is no such thing as an ethical dilemma. These three slogans characterize a mind-set toward the chain of command in which role-playing equals performance, appearance equals reality, and the right thing to do is somebody else's worry. *RHIP* reinforces such a mindset, encouraging the commander to hide behind his rank and its privileges. Being infallible is not one of those privileges; but pretending to be is often one of its assumed prerogatives.

The slogans and catchy shibboleths discussed above fall into two primary categories: those which indicate a need to achieve, and those which betray a need to be recognized. Psychologically, the two needs are related; but in terms of professional ethics they are poles apart. The crucial difference is that the need to achieve is "buoyed up by hopes of success" while the need to be recognized is "driven by fear of failure."²

The former is associated with the possession of a strong ego and independent attitudes of mind, the latter with a weak ego and feelings of dependency. Whereas the former achieves out of a quest for excellence in his job, the latter achieves *by any means available*, not necessarily because of any sincere devotion to his work, but because of the status, social approval, and reduction of doubts about the self that such achievement brings.³

This insightful distinction tells us that leaders who motivate subordinates by appeals to excellence and encouragement of independence are promoting integrity. Those who capitalize on fear of failure and competitive pressures are promoting dissembling and self-seeking—the very antitheses of integrity.

Integrity is by definition a condition in which the role and the real self are congruent.

Both the Army War College Professionalism Study of 1970 and the updated version of 1977⁴ contain irrefutable evidence of a continuing ethical tension within the officer corps. The officers' most deeply held values are corporative; they reinforce a sense of brotherhood and encourage selflessness. But members of the officer corps do not perceive the personnel system as rewarding behavior that reflects these values. The decisive indicator is not how the officer has performed, since the Officer Evaluation Report system no longer has the ability to discriminate among performances to the required degree. The decisive indicators now relate rather to where one has been and whom one knows. This fact intensifies the normal conflict between self-interest (promotion and survival) and self-fulfillment (doing a good job). Those officers who are burdened by an ethical need to reconcile appearance and reality are clearly at a disadvantage in coping successfully with the system.

The foregoing problem is not a new one. The ethical dilemma it presents is as old as mankind. Short of a change in human nature itself, there can be no improvement at the individual level. But so far as the Army as an institution is concerned, there is a possibility for improvement. When the slogans used to describe the organization's expectations no longer reflect the officers' sense of what makes for integrity, the sensitive among them can no longer identify with the organization. When any organization generates an identity crisis in its most loyal officers, it invites them to either ignore their consciences or leave the organization. Both courses will in the end defeat the Army's stated goals.

NOTES

1. US Army War College, *Study on Military Professionalism* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, 30 June 1970).

2. Norman Dixon, *On the Psychology of Military Incompetence* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 239.

3. Ibid.

4. Melville A. Drisko, *An Analysis of Professional Military Ethics: Their Importance, Development, and Incultation* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College, 19 June 1977).